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ABSTRACT

Differences were explored in the way 55 mothers disciplined 28 gifted children and 27 nongifted children (4-7 years old). Both sets of the mothers and gifted Ss participated in structured interviews, and a measure of child problem behaviors was also obtained. While results did not substantiate the hypothesis that mothers of gifted children would report the use of more reasoning as a disciplinary technique than mothers of nongifted children, reasoning was the main technique reported by both groups. Both groups also identified a combination of power assertion techniques and reasoning. Predictions of gifted Ss regarding what their mothers would do in certain situations were incongruent with their mothers' reports, however. (Author/CL)

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DISCIPLINARY TECHNIQUES REPORTED BY PARENTS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

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Abstract

There is an interest in the development of gifted children in order to better understand them and nurture their abilities. However, research has mainly focused on their intellectual development; it would be remissed not to explore the other arenas of their development if they are to be understood as complete persons. An exhaustive literature review did not reveal any studies specifically addressing the issue of disciplining gifted children though it has been acknowledged that sometimes these children's behaviors may create "problems" for their parents and those around them.

The present study is an attempt to explore the differences in the way mothers of gifted children and non-gifted children discipline their children, and also how the gifted children perceive of the way they are being disciplined. Subjects were 55 sets of 4 through 7-year-old children and their mothers, with 28 of the children being gifted (mean IQ 139.4, SD 8.6) and 27 non-gifted (mean IQ 106.1, SD 9.2). Both sets of the mothers and the gifted children were given structured interviews regarding current disciplinary practices being employed. A measure of child problem behaviors was also obtained. It was hypothesized the disciplinary techniques reported by the mothers would be mainly a function of the children's cognitive development. While results did not substantiate the hypothesis that mothers of gifted children would report the use of more reasoning as a disciplinary technique than mothers of non-gifted children, reasoning was found to be the main technique reported by both groups. A combination of power assertion techniques and reasoning was also reported by both groups. The gifted children's predictions of what their mothers

would do in certain situations were incongruent with what their mothers were reporting, however.

DISCIPLINARY TECHNIQUES REPORTED BY PARENTS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

Introduction

A central task of childhood is socialization, "the teaching of discriminations concerning appropriate and inappropriate responses through inhibiting undesirable behaviors and strengthening prosocial responses" (Parke, 1970, p. 81). Cognitive maturation and experience enable children to acquire the social judgment to guide their behavior and achieve self-control. By definition, gifted children's intellectual and psychological development are more advanced than other children of the same age, and therefore their socialization process may differ from that of children of average intelligence. Although numerous investigators have addressed parental child-rearing practices and their effects on children's compliance and competence, an exhaustive literature review did not reveal any empirical research involved with discipline of gifted children.

Parents use a variety of disciplinary techniques such as power assertion, (e.g. physical punishment, withdrawal of privileges, and forced appropriate behavior), isolation, ignoring, diversion, simple requests and reasoning (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980). Power assertion and reasoning are two of the techniques most broadly investigated. Power assertive techniques often yield ill effects (Redd, Morris, & Martin, 1975; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957), but may be enhanced when combined with reasoning.

Reasoning also plays a salient role in socialization (Baumrind, 1971; Becker, Peterson, Luria, Shoemaker, & Hellmer, 1962; Hoffman, 1970; Parke, 1970; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957), moderating punishment effects (Cheyne & Walters, 1969; Parke, 1969) and encouraging moral development (Hoffman,

1970; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). The definition of reasoning differs, however, from study to study. Sometimes reasoning is defined as explanation or rationale given by parents for restraints on the child's behavior, descriptions of consequences that the child's behavior may bring for himself or others, provisions of examples of incompatible socially acceptable behaviors, or simple explicit directions on how to behave in specific situations. In some studies, the parameters of reasoning are not defined at all.

The effectiveness of types and complexities of reasoning varies with the cognitive development of the child. Cheyne (1972), for example, found first graders to respond equally to a rationale and a simple verbal prohibition, while third graders responded better to a prohibitory rationale stressing the norm of ownership. In their 1971 study, Parke and Murray found concrete, object-oriented appeal focusing on physical consequences to be more effective for 4-year-olds, and person-oriented property rule stressing the ethical norm of ownership more effective with 7-year-olds, a finding predicted by Kohlberg's moral judgment development system (1964) which move from the physical consequences of actions to more abstract, person-oriented rationales.

Though parents influence their children's behavior, the reverse is also true (Bell, 1968; Yarrow et al., 1971). Personal characteristics of the child such as responsiveness (Mulhern & Passman, 1981), style of responding (Parke, 1974), gender (Mulhern & Passman, 1981), attractiveness (Dion, 1974), and age (Clifford, 1959), influence the types of discipline parents use. Hoffman (1975) proposed that a child able to function at a higher level of moral reasoning can be more receptive to it and is in turn

apt to elicit induction from the parent.

The effect of child characteristics is often seen best in children deviant from the norm. Gifted children, besides being intellectually advanced, are described as possessing greater awareness and ability to understand and to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experience (Roeper, 1982), exceptional abilities to reason (Whitmore, 1979) and superior interpersonal sensitivity developed at at early age (Boston, 1979; Male, 1979; Rice, 1970). They are capable of quick and accurate memory and generalization and of mastery of abstract symbols (Newland, 1970). The development of moral judgment of these children is also more advanced (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Tan-Williams & Gutteride, 1981; Thorndyke, 1940). Roedell (1980) has contended that although gifted these children tend to show advanced understanding of social situations and feelings, as children, they need to be guided in making use of their advanced social understanding.

Their reliance on reasoning can sometimes have negative consequences for gifted children. Gifted children may respond well to a more rational approach to discipline of behavior problems; even in early years, they may be helped to identify and evaluate the consequences of specific behaviors (Whitmore, 1979), but at the same time they may "reason back" and grow adept at manipulation. Behaviors such as refusal to comply until a rationale is given and argumentativeness are often viewed as problematic by teachers and parents and pose a challenge of management.

It appears, then, reasonable to expect that parents of gifted children respond to the characteristics of their children, and choose their disciplinary techniques accordingly. Because of the abilities and

characteristics of gifted children, it would seem that the use of reasoning should be the technique of choice for parents of gifted children. Yet, specific empirical research involved with the discipline of gifted children is almost non-existent. Only 5 journal publications of interest were found, and even they were not empirical studies. Whitmore's (1979) article, "Discipline and the Gifted Child", advised parents how to deal with behavioral "problems" of gifted children. On styles of parenting, with mothers of non-gifted children and gifted children matched on SES, Karnes, Schwendel, & Steinberg (1985) found that mothers of gifted children spent significantly more time reading to their children, took them to more culturally-oriented activities, talked more to them about feelings and emotions, wanted professional or scientific careers for them, were more involved in their school activities, wished that their children were more independent, and last of all, on the issue of discipline, less frequently used spanking. Roberts, Carter, & Mosely (1982) compared the perceptions of gifted 9 to 15-year-olds with those of their parents regarding rules in the home and consequences of misbehavior. The parents reported that the same kind of discipline was not effective for all children but felt that withdrawal of privileges seemed to work the best. In another article, Hurley (1975) found that less intelligent children elicited more rejecting behaviors and/or punishment from parents than did more intelligent children, lending support to the expectation that more reasoning and less punishment is used with gifted children. In the last article, Wolfe, Katell, & Drabman (1982) worked with preschoolers of above average intellectual and physical development. The children were asked to view a videotape depicting six common parent/child conflicts such as refusal to go

to bed, throwing tantrums, and lying about misbehavior. Significant correlations were found between the children's choice of techniques if they were the parents, their predictions of their own parents' actions, and the parents' indication of the type of discipline they would use in the same situations.

In the present study, disciplinary techniques reported by the mothers of gifted children to shape their social judgment, self-control, and compliance were compared with the techniques reported by mothers of children of average intelligence. Behavior problems, as reported by the mothers, were compared for the two groups of children. The gifted children's perceptions of discipline employed by their mothers were also investigated. We expected that reasoning would be the technique of choice for mothers of gifted children and would be used with higher frequency by those mothers than mothers of children of average intelligence; that both groups of mother would use a combination of disciplinary techniques; and that the reports of gifted children would be congruent with the techniques reported by their mothers.

Method

Subjects

The sample of non-gifted children (mean IQ 106.1, SD 9.2) consisted of 27 4 through 7-year-olds who, with their mothers, were a subsample of subjects recruited through notices posted at Seattle area preschools and daycare centers for a doctoral study by Gad (1985). This sample consisted of 11 boys and 16 girls (mean age 5.5 years, SD 1.1). Their IQ scores were obtained from the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale administered by Gad.

A sample of 30 gifted children (mean IQ 139.4, SD 8.6) ranging from 4

through 7 years of age (mean age 5.9 years, SD 1.0) and their mothers were recruited from three private schools for gifted children in the Seattle area via invitational letters sent through the schools. The IQ scores of the children were obtained from the files of their respective schools. The data for only 28 sets of the dyads were used in the final analysis, however, because two fathers participated.

There were some significant differences between the two groups of mothers: age (gifted mean 36.6 years, non-gifted mean 31.4 years), (t (53) = 4.99, p <.001); SES classification based on Hollingshead's Two Factor Index, ($\chi^2(4, N = 55) = 16.50$, p <.005); family income bracket, ($\chi^2(6, N = 51) = 29.65$, p <.001); and education, ($\chi^2(4, N = 55) = 11.46$, p <.05). The children differed significantly in IQ, (t (53) =13.83, p <.001) as well as in the type of schools they attended, private versus public.

Procedure

Each mother was presented with 12 audio-taped vignettes of children engaged in various hypothetical misdemeanors (Grusec and Kuczynski, 1980), and was asked to describe what she would do in each situation, pretending it was her child. Mothers were allowed to respond to individual situations with as many techniques as they wished as long as they made it clear that they would use all of the techniques in combination and not as alternative responses to the misdemeanor. The misdemeanors were divided into five categories:

1. Simple disobedience, (4 situations) e.g. ignoring request to stop making noise
2. Disobedience causing harm to physical objects, (1 situation) breaking vase playing ball inside house

3. Disobedience through which the child could hurt himself, (2 situations) e.g. running into the street after a ball

4. Disobedience leading to physical harm to others, (2 situations) e.g. fighting over bat with playmate

5. Disobedience leading to psychological harm to others, (3 situations) e.g. calling an elderly man names

The gifted children also listened to the same 12 vignettes and were interviewed regarding how they thought their mothers would discipline them if they had committed those misdemeanors. To ensure that the children comprehended the situations on the tapes, they were asked to tell the investigator what they thought was going on in each situation after listening to it. If it was unclear, the investigator explained it to them.

Disciplinary techniques were classified as: POWER ASSERTION (physical, verbal, withdrawal, and force of appropriate behavior), REASONING (matter-of-fact and other-oriented), ISOLATION, SIMPLE REQUEST, IGNORE and DIVERSION.

The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI, Eyberg, 1980) was administered to the two groups of mothers to assess any difference in the behavior of the children. The ECBI is a 36-item inventory of the most typical problem behaviors reported by parents of conduct problem children. The two groups of children did not differ significantly in mean number of problems exhibited (gifted mean 5.6, SD 5.1; non-gifted mean 7.3, SD 6.9),(t (53) = -1.01, p =.32) or in the frequency with which each behavior occurred (mean Intensity Score for the gifted children was 91.89, SD 25.57, and 104.30, SD 22.60 for the children of average intelligence), (t (53) = -1.89, p =.06). The means were well below the cut off for

clinic referred conduct problem children.

A demographic questionnaire was also completed by each mother.

RESULTS

Mother's choices of disciplinary techniques

A modification of Grusec and Kuczynski's coding was used for the interview data. It can be seen in Table 1 that the most frequently used response reported by both groups of mothers in this study was matter-of-fact REASONING, followed by the POWER ASSERTION techniques, withdrawal of privileges and forced appropriate behavior. Mothers of the gifted children reported using significantly more SIMPLE REQUESTS for compliance ($\chi^2(1, n = 55) = 6.64$, $p < .01$) and IGNORING ($\chi^2(1, n = 55) = 9.05$, $p < .01$) than mothers of the non-gifted children. Mothers of the non-gifted children reported using significantly more physical POWER ASSERTION ($\chi^2(1, n = 55) = 42.34$, $p < .001$) and other-oriented REASONING ($\chi^2(1, n = 55 = 4.54$, $p < .05$) than did the mothers of the gifted children. The two groups of mothers did not differ in their reported use of DIVERSION and verbal POWER ASSERTION.

Both groups of mothers responded using an average of two techniques per child misbehavior. In 74% of their responses to the vignettes, the mothers of the gifted children used techniques in combination, versus 82% of the responses of mothers of non-gifted children. The most frequent pairing of techniques for both groups of mothers was matter-of-fact REASONING with the POWER ASSERTION techniques of withdrawal of privileges and forced appropriate behavior. Both groups of mothers used primarily other-oriented REASONING in situations involving the child's causing possible psychological harm to another person.

Children's predictions of disciplinary techniques used by mothers

Referring to Table 2, it can be seen that there was some discrepancy between the gifted children's reports of the disciplinary techniques their mothers would use and the mothers' reports. The most frequently used technique reported by the children was ISOLATION, followed by withdrawal of privileges, verbal POWER ASSERTION (i.e., yelling) and physical POWER ASSERTION. The children described significantly less matter-of-fact REASONING ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 36.97$, $p < .001$), other-oriented REASONING ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 53.54$, $p < .001$), withdrawal of privileges ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 5.20$, $p < .05$), forced appropriate behavior ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 8.57$, $p < .01$) and DIVERSION ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 12.86$, $p < ,001$) than their mothers reported. The children described significantly more physical POWER ASSERTION (i.e., spanking), ($\chi^2(1, n = 56) = 18.91$, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference in reported use of verbal POWER ASSERTION, ISOLATION, SIMPLE REQUEST for compliance and IGNORING. The children tended to pair the techniques of ISOLATION with the POWER ASSERTION of withdrawal of privileges when they reported more than one technique. However they reported the use of only one technique a majority of the time.

In summary, the gifted children's predictions of what their mothers would do in disciplinary situations differed significantly from what their mothers reported they would do. The children predicted much more punitive techniques and almost an absence of the use of reasoning. Rather than predicting combinations of techniques, the children predicted single techniques a majority of the time.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The finding that mothers of gifted children reported REASONING as the

discipline technique of choice was consistent with the first hypothesis. In addition, the mothers of gifted children reported significantly less physical POWER ASSERTION than the mothers of children with average intelligence. It is suggested that the cognitive abilities of gifted children makes REASONING an effective disciplinary technique.

However, the second hypothesis was not supported. The finding that mothers of gifted children did not use more matter-of-fact REASONING and used significantly less frequent other-oriented REASONING than mothers of non-gifted children was unexpected. Perhaps the mothers of gifted children feel they only need to state the rules or consequences of the act. The finding that mothers of gifted children reported significantly more SIMPLE REQUEST and IGNORE than the mothers of non-gifted children might reflect an assumption by the mothers of gifted children that their children already know the reasoning behind requests for compliance; all that is needed is simple request and ignoring.

An interesting aside was discovered upon closer scrutiny of the responses of the mothers of the non-gifted children. The other-oriented reasons reported often were oriented toward the mothers themselves. For example, the mothers would say, "If you fall off the stair railing, I would feel very bad", "I would feel very sad if you got hit by a car", etc. This type of reasoning, while still other-oriented, seems to be at a different level, almost a lower level, than statements such as "Think of how Mr. Hopkins feels when you call him names", or "Your friend would like to have a turn at playing with the tricycle just like you do, too".

The finding that both groups of mothers used a combination of disciplinary techniques in each situation supported the third hypothesis.

This also replicates Grusec and Kuczynski's 1980 findings. Both groups used REASONING mostly in combination with POWER ASSERTIONS of withdrawal of privileges and forced appropriate behavior.

Another unexpected finding, however, was the incongruence of mothers' responses with the gifted children's statements of what their mothers would do in the situations. The use of REASONING was predicted significantly less by the children. Instead, they predicted much more POWER ASSERTIONS and ISOLATION. This finding may suggest that although these children are intellectually advanced, at preschool age they are still at a stage of moral development that they believe if they commit a misdemeanor, they should be punished for it, and at a cognitive stage where external motivations are more salient than internal motivations. The existing studies of gifted children's advanced moral development have been focused on children 9 and older. Similarly, punitive measures may be more salient to young children, so even if they are punished infrequently, they tend to remember it longer than being talked to; action speaks louder than words. Another possible explanation may be methodologically related. Perhaps children do better with visual aid as in the Wolfe et al. (1982) study, and just listening, even with clarifications, may not have been enough to enable the children in the present study to get the situation clearly fixed in their minds. Still another alternative explanation may be that mothers were under-reporting their use of punitive techniques due to the social desirability factor. Data do not exist to test any of these alternative hypotheses.

In conclusion, the parents of gifted children do seem to have a different style of helping their children go through the socialization

process. Furthermore, it is to be noted that even though the two sets of mothers used different techniques, their children did not differ significantly in their ECBI scores; scores for both groups of children were far below the conduct problem cutoff. This can be taken as evidence that one parenting style is not necessarily better than another, but that as long as the style fits the characteristics of the child, it can be effective.

Though interesting information was gained from this study, caution need to be exercised in generalizing these results to other gifted children. A sampling bias exists, with the sample, a small one and a voluntary one, having been drawn from private schools for gifted children. Results may also be sensitive to the family income, age, education and the SES of the mother. Furthermore, naturalistic observations in the home may yield more conclusive data on actual disciplinary techniques employed.

Table 1

Discipline Techniques Used By the Mothers

Technique [a]	Total frequency of responses		(1 df, N = 55)
	Gifted	Non-gifted	
Power assertion--withdrawal of privileges	97	104	1.123
Matter-of-fact reasoning	178	176	.986
Power assertion--forced appropriate behavior	90	91	.000
Other-oriented reasoning	38	55	4.536 *
Power assertion--verbal	46	51	.288
Power assertion--physical	13	67	42.340 ***
Isolation	54	69	.212
Ignore-no reaction	24	8	9.046 **
Child diverted to an acceptable behavior	14	8	1.724
Simple request for compliance	33	17	6.638 **

[a] Notes :
Order of frequency as described by Grusec and Kuczynski (1980).

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Table 2

Discipline Techniques Predicted by Gifted Children and Used By Their Mothers

Technique[a]	Total frequency of responses		(1 df, N =55)
	Moms	Predictions	
Power assertion--withdrawal of privileges	97	68	5.196 *
Matter-of-fact reasoning	178	38	36.970 ***
Power assertion--forced appropriate behavior	90	50	8.570 **
Other-oriented reasoning	38	2	53.535 ***
Power assertion--verbal	46	66	.124
Power assertion--physical	13	59	18.914 ***
Isolation	54	90	1.036
Ignore-no reaction	24	15	3.509
Child diverted to an acceptable behavior	14	1	12.857 ***
Simple request for compliance	33	48	.058

Notes :

[a] Order of frequency as described by Grusec and Kuczynski (1980).

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

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